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The topic of each article is chosen at the discretion of the author and its content does not necessarily reflect the views of European University at St. Petersburg

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Leaves of Trash, or Why Do Many Russians Like Old Cheap Italian Pop?

Fabio De Leonardis

Exactly ten years ago, together with a group of friends from various countries, we went for a night out to one of St. Petersburg most renowned music clubs. We danced almost all night to an excellent, and far from banal, selection of Russian and international music. Then, at a certain moment, I heard a familiar melody which left me open-mouthed and paralyzed, prompting my mates to ask me what was wrong with me: it was *Mamma Maria*, a song by the Italian pop trio “Ricchi e poveri” (“The rich and the poor”). How did such a cheap commercial song, which was popular *in the early 1980s*, end up in that selection? To understand my shock, just imagine what your reaction would be if Boris Grebenshikov suddenly started to yell “Ryumka vodki na stole” during an “Akvarium” concert. Nine years later, this time in Samara, I casually bumped into a TV transmission in which the aforementioned trio was being interviewed. Russia, to be sure, is not the only country where they are popular, but what is striking is that in Italy the most they can achieve is to play for a public of bored holidaymakers in provincial summer resorts: how is it that here they are superstars? The same applies to Toto Cutugno: he is considered a classic in Russia, while in Italy he is seen as a dinosaur of another pop era, and not one to be remembered.

True, if these artists are still fashionable, it is also because of a nostalgia effect, for songs like *Mamma Maria* and the infamous *L'italiano* (whose lyrics are but a heap of commonplaces on Italians) are related to the particular period of time when they first became widespread in the USSR; moreover, most listeners are unlikely to understand the lyrics (luckily for them), and probably pay attention only to the catchy music. But the fact remains that for many Russians they are among the best representatives of Italian pop music. One wonders why, with very few exceptions, quality Italian music did and does not reach these shores in the same quantity that its musical trash does. Despite the flood of cheap commercial music in the last twenty years, there are many artists, young and old, who would deserve being known by the Russian public: from veteran rock lady Gianna Nannini to refined experimentalist Franco Battiato, to the fresh and eclectic

mix of pop and world music of Radiodervish. This is not to speak of Italian songwriters. In the cases of Paolo Conte and Pino Daniele the quality of their music is such that one can appreciate them even without understanding the lyrics. And yet, they did not make it to Russia, even though they are known abroad. I suspect that this situation depends less on the Russian side (which seems eager to import Italian music, no matter what the quality is) than on the Italian one. The Italian music industry probably still does not see Russia as a mature market and artists go abroad only once they have fully exploited their home audience. Maybe the Italian music industry should become less provincial in its attitude, and see beyond the borders of Italy or those of the EU. After all, Russia is Europe's biggest and most populated country, and execs should alter their tactics, at the very least, in order to not torture the ears of Italian expats.



The Russian Church of the Evangelical Faith: A Reply to Head Bishop Edward Grabovenko's Vision for Future Outreaches

Angelina White

While perusing the internet, I noticed a short video that was just released on the hve.ru website today. From time to time I visit the organization's website, since it is both in Russian and English, and it offers a unique perspective on news and events across Russia from the church's perspective. The video is less than 3 minutes long, and features the Head Bishop of the Russian Evangelical Christian Church, Edward Grabovenko, answering questions about the church's role in social outreaches, and its vision for meeting the needs of Russian society in the future. I also found it interesting how he replied in the Q&A section of the website, in particular regarding the country's tendency to implement foreign systematic models in Russia, simply because they were successful in other countries. His answer was pretty clear and in line with what various church representatives have said on other occasions where I have had the opportunity to talk with them: what works abroad should not immediately be implemented here in Russia, and the church is no exception to this. Simply 'copying and pasting' will not work, but moreover, this country has such a unique demographic situation that a simplified 'one size fits all' way of doing things will not always work. And I personally believe that this does not apply simply to religious affairs, but also to many different aspects of Russian society.

Head Bishop Grabovenko also believes that if the Russian Evangelical Church is going to effectively reach out to its own people, it needs to receive any and all advice with a dose of caution. What works in another city, country, or local population may not work for others, yet it is up to church leaders and workers to take the time to listen, think, and pray: listen to the advice of other Christian workers abroad, but take plenty of time to think about if certain models will really work for their community, and to pray for inspiration on the best possible way to reach out to them.

I have to agree with the bishop in this area, and I must say that this is an issue that the REC church's leaders and workers seem to agree on across the board. In the 1990's, so many different religious groups flooded Russia after the end of the

Soviet Union, that many people described an overwhelming feeling of what to make of it all – is it something that they should receive with 'open arms,' or should these groups and ideas simply be labeled 'alien,' as just more foreign influence that Russia doesn't need? I am well aware of the fact that many Slavophiles would echo a resounding 'yes' to that question, but let me just add why that would be detrimental to Russia's progress as a unique society.

The Russian Evangelical Christian Church outreaches that I have seen and participated in have demonstrated to me that the participants are discovering and developing their own unique identity throughout this process. They are no longer trying to just mimic some foreign influence as in the past, but are learning and growing as individuals and professionals in the process of reaching out to their own communities. Many REC churches in Saint Petersburg, for example, have been developing their own unique culture in the performing arts. In fact, they have been taking the former-Soviet tradition of amateur performances at 'Dom Kulturi' and 'Dom Molodezhi' (Cultural and Youth Centers) and reviving it to an extent, offering a platform for churchgoers to participate in worship and social outreach events through music, dance, and theatrical performances. This cultural revival is not intentional, in my opinion, since the sheer lack of money to obtain their own facilities in this architecturally rich city has forced many non-orthodox church organizations and groups to rent office and theatre spaces in these forgotten buildings in order to conduct church activities and hold events. But instead of this rather large logistical obstacle inhibiting them from growing and reaching out to society, it has become an artistic vehicle for them to share their faith with each other and with the community in a very creative and personal way. Yet let's not forget that the church's self-realization and artistic growth is a work in progress (and always will be), since in previous eras these platforms were either highly discouraged or forbidden altogether. But if Russia as a whole is going to progress and effectively reach out to the many different cultural and ethnic groups throughout the country, it should heed Head Bishop Grabovenko's wise advice to listen, think, and pray before acting hastily.

Further Fear of Dissent

Ben Sigelman

The implementation of the new law signed in on March 19 by Governor Poltavchenko and March 27 by the Federation Council further restricting the possibilities of public demonstrations is the latest reaction from the government against its dissidents. From its very beginning, Strategy 31 has been controversial, facing constant state counteraction, mainly through the use of the paramilitary forces of OMON. Now, the law, specific to St. Petersburg, prevents the meeting every other month by stripping away its significance. While not necessary, the symbolic nature of gather in areas such as the Nevsky Prospekt metro station is itself a poignant gesture in the city itself.

Public protests have increased in recent years, especially following the parliamentary elections in December 2011. Previously, the plan in dealing with the movement has been planning an event related to the state, such as a gathering of the pro-Kremlin movement

"Young Russia", on the days of the protests in order to have a previously planned event preventing any possibility of them having any acceptable legal status. While the effect the new law will have on supporters of the government, its opponents are now stripped of the places that they associate with public defiance and the expression of individual rights.

It is not only Strategy 31 that will feel the impact of the new law; the arrests made at the protests in response to alleged corruption in the parliamentary elections, in which the leading party United Russia maintained its ruling status, were met with massive arrests in both Moscow and St. Petersburg. The increase of state restriction regarding public gatherings is a continuation in the crack-down on any and all opposition. In addition to the demand for fair elections in the December 2011 protests was the demand for the release of political prisoners. This call follows the overall movement for rights guaranteed without their continuous altering.

The new restrictions put in place by the law continue the gradual move towards a police state. As public gatherings are suppressed, the expression of public opinion will die out as a result, leaving no space for open criticism, even if it is in the best in-

terests of the country.

With the implementation of controversial laws including the ban on homosexual propaganda aimed at minors and the Magnitsky Act, public demonstration might be the only way to effectively combat the dominant presence of United Russia and its party line in the government. However, by having both control of governmental institutions and banning public gatherings within a 50 meter radius of the entrance or exit to a building occupied by the state authorities, the local government remains untouchable, able to marginalize its opponents and prevent them from gaining the attention that was the goal of the demonstration. The loose language of the law, such as the requirement to maintain order at the territories of historical and cultural monuments, further allows for interpretive implementation of legal actions as seen fit. Therefore, authorities may now deal with protests with efficiency.

The conservative measures taken by the local government continue to distance its image from that of a cultural capital. Furthermore, while Strategy 31 may be seen as protest, it is not necessarily so. It can be used, in one of its purposes, to show that opposition is at all possible. However, the exercise of rights that lies at its base is becoming increasingly tied with opposition.

Much like the law banning homosexuality, the law in St. Petersburg may be adapted to a national scale. The continuing wave of restrictive laws is indicative of the grip of the conservative Putin regime on any and all opposition. Protests in Russia will undoubtedly continue, but the state will respond with more actions including arrests and police brutality. Strategy 31 will most likely not see approval from the government, but the new legal strategies both create obstacles for and give it a new sense of motivation.

Russian Holidays and Productivity

Anthony Sacoccio

It seems like 2013 just got underway but we are already, at this point, half way through April. This presents us with a special time in the Russian calendar. A long time between holidays! March gave us International Women's Day (this holiday is celebrated only in Russia and Vietnam) as well as Maslenitsa, but the next holiday is not until May 9th, that is unless you count Easter.

The average United States, Norwegian, and Japanese worker gets between 20 and 25 days off per year. The average Russian worker gets around 40. So what does this mean? Let's compare the each country to Russia and how it stacks up in things like overall happiness and productivity. If we take Japan, a country with roughly the same population as Russia, we see a country that has one of the worlds highest life expectancies, as well as being in the top 10 of the most productive countries in the world. Of course, a brutal work-week leaves many Japanese men and women exhausted, and therefore overall happiness is not the highest. The U.S. is very unique because it is a huge country in terms of population and is by far the most productive of any populace country when it comes to economic output relative to size. But again, the U.S., for an industrialized nation, does not fare as well as other nations who may be less productive but have happier citizens. Finally, like most categories of happiness and productivity, leave it up to the Northern Europeans to take first prize. Norway, for example, boasts the most productive citizens on earth as well as some of the happiest.

Russia would like to improve in both of these categories and so far it seems that number of days off does not equal happiness. They should take a few helpful hints and suggestions: increase productivity by lessening the time off of its citizens, create holidays that can be celebrated during a week long festival or something similar so certain days can be commemorated, free time can be had by all, and productivity does not leave Russia falling behind the worlds economic elite.

Croatian Creations: What You Don't Know About Early Russian Relations in the Slavic West

Elizabeth Smith

What usually comes to mind when we think of the former republics of Yugoslavia is Russia's brotherly sentiments with the Serbs. Russia shares the Orthodox faith with Serbia, as well as history; they allied against the Ottoman Empire to alleviate the South Slavic region from Turkish rule. Croatia, on the other hand, is still considered the infamous adversary in the still painfully recent Yugoslav conflicts. There is therefore an unfortunate but understandable disconnect for Russians towards the Republic of Croatia. But Russians would be surprised by just how much influence this Western Slavic people have had on their own culture and development. From the early times of Christianity in Russia, Croatian culture was seeping in. When the Bible was first translated for Russians in Novgorod, it was with a Croatian editor, causing many Croatian words to be preserved in the text. Peter the Great put his navy and shipbuilding company under the supervision of the experts: Croats of the Adriatic Coast. And it was a joint Russian-Croatian expedition who discovered Franz Josef Island in the Arctic Sea. Some experts even suggest that the Winter Palace was designed after Diocletian's Palace, a Roman ruin located on the Dalmatian coast, in Split. Thus, while on the surface Russia's brotherhood with Croatia may be less apparent than with Serbia, it is not to be underestimated. In Croatia, Russia is revered as a northern cousin making incredible contributions to world art, science, and literature. In fact, the next time you decide to take a seaside holiday, you can see the first ever monument erected in memory of Leo Tolstoy – in Croatia.

Do Outsiders Care More About Russian Restorations than Russians?

Elizabeth Smith

Q 2013 marks 400 years since the Romanov Dynasty came to power; accordingly, many new exhibits and renovations are taking place in Tsarskoe Selo. When you go to visit, however, there is a noticeable absence of interest in regards to Alexander Palace. There is the occasional school group, a straggling tourist, but for the most part – an overabundance of babushki with no one to inform of the building's history. If you take your observations online, however, you will find a completely different atmosphere. With an entire English website and discussion forum dedicated to the palace, it would appear that interest in the home of the last Imperial Family is more concentrated outside of Russia's borders. In contrast, across the park, Catherine Palace is immensely popular. Where is the disconnect? The draw to Alexander Palace for outsiders may be rooted in the enigmatic mystery of Anastasia; for Russians, keeping it at a distance may be a way of avoiding a sensitive piece of history they are not sure how to approach.



Review: "The Americans"

Jenni Kornfeld

A new series from the United States about Soviet sleeper agents has become wildly popular over the last few months. The show premiered in January on FX. It is currently wrapping up its first season and has already been approved for a second. The title of the series is "The Americans." It centers around the lives of two KGB sleeper agents living in a Washington D.C. suburb in 1981. They pose as a married couple with two children and 'work' at a travel agency. The Reagan era setting was a deliberate choice, as series creator Joe Weisberg thought a present-day setting might be too risky. Weisberg's inspiration for the series came from the events surrounding the Illegals Program, the FBI investigation which resulted in the arrest of ten Russian sleeper agents in 2010. "...A modern day setting didn't seem like a good idea. People were both shocked and simultaneously shrugged at the [2010] scandal because it didn't seem like we were really enemies with Russia anymore." (Interview with Weisberg <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/01/30/qa-the-ciaofficer-behind-the-new-spy-drama-theamericans/#ixzz2Q3MIm9Zd>) Weisberg is actually a former CIA agent. His time working as an agent may lend some verisimilitude to the series, at least in terms of accuracy of the type of spy equipment used by the characters. The premise is rather intriguing in and of itself, but what is so interesting about this series is that the viewer inevitably finds himself sympathizing with the 'enemy'. Compared to decades of American film and television portraying Soviet spies as evil, soulless, and/or comical characters, emphasizing negative stereotypes, Weisberg's depiction is a breath of fresh air, here they are "just like us." These Soviet spies are the new anti-heroes of American television. Elizabeth and Phillip, the two central characters, or rather, Nadezhda and Mischa, are not the kind of spies that are simply trying to break codes, to obtain classified information to send back home, or to recruit Americans to the Communist party. They are trained killers. And yet, even after witnessing the characters do terrible things in the name of Socialism, we somehow forgive them. We might even want them to succeed in their mission of taking down capitalism. This can be rather unsettling at times. The show also raises

many interesting questions. For instance, what it means to believe so passionately in an institution that is not always what it seems to be, or, perhaps more importantly, what we want it to be. It boldly demands the viewer to ask the question, "Were the people on the other side of the Cold War really that much different from us?"

Just as compelling is the actual marriage itself, the dynamic between two very different mindsets. Elizabeth is much more dedicated to the cause than Philip, unwaveringly committed to her work and the motherland; she would sooner die than defect. Even with her stubbornness and cold demeanor, it is easy to sympathize with her. Philip on the other hand has become accustomed to the American lifestyle. He has come to appreciate the fact that there is air conditioning nearly everywhere and an absence of lines in grocery stores. At one point he even considers defecting, and tries to convince Elizabeth to do the same, but she replies by saying that there is a 'weakness' in the American people. To make the plot more interesting, there is an FBI agent living right next store, coincidentally of course, a Russian mole at the embassy, unlikely romances, and all sorts of twists and turns in alliances.

As an American viewer, I was curious to know what Russians think of the show, do they feel that this new portrayal of Soviet spies is a positive step? Or perhaps it is still grossly inaccurate. I managed to find one Russian reaction to the show, which was surprisingly positive. In an interview from 'Slate', journalist June Thomas speaks with the director of Radio Liberty's Russian service, Masha Gessen. The reporter asks Gessen if the portrayal of Russians in the final decade of the Soviet Union rings true to her. Gessen's response:

"The incredible thing about *The Americans* is that I find it utterly believable. I don't mean some of the latest plot turns or the very shaky premise that Philip and Elizabeth could, as adults, have learned to speak English like natives, but the overall psychology has me hooked." http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/tv_club/features/2013/the_americans_season_1_recapped/episode_9/the_americans_season_1_recap_episode_guide_nd_review_for_episode_9_1.html

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Gessen also praises the accurate portrayal of the rezidentura, the secret-police outpost at the Soviet Embassy, calling it “uncannily accurate.” Perhaps this new approach to the portrayal of Soviet spies in mainstream media will begin to have a positive affect on how Americans regard Russia’s past, and how we perceive Russia today.



Resources:

The Challenge of Researching Russian Culture in English: Web Resources for the Curious Anglophone

An English-speaking student of Russian culture and history wishing to stay up-to-date on cultural issues faces peculiar and frustrating challenges. Academic literature has already gone through a lengthy process before it reaches publication, making it slow to pick up on the most contemporary issues, while much of Russian news media and unofficial Internet culture is largely inaccessible due to the language barrier. Furthermore, much of the online news available in English is either government owned or devoted exclusively to political and economic topics. However, for the determined Anglophone, there can be found a number of web-based resources devoted to Russia, which offer insight into the current cultural milieu.

For example, the Russian government along with some related foundations have a few options through which it presents its version of Russian culture to the English-speaking world. The Russkiy Mir <http://www.ruskiymir.ru/ruskiymir/en/> website is connected to the homonymous foundation and journal and covers Russian language and culture. In particular, it contains commentaries and analyses by external authors and its editorial staff. Another option is the Culture of Russia <http://www.russianculture.ru/defengl.asp> site, run by the Russian Federation's Ministry of Culture, which, though only partly in English, provides a rich archive of resources on diverse aspects of Russian culture, as well as up-to-date information on cultural events. If Russian 'high' culture is the topic of choice, then there is the Russian Cultural Heritage Web Portal <http://culture.ru/en/>, also run by the Ministry of Culture, which contains daily updated information on cultural events, as well as virtual tours of several museums. As in the days of the Soviet Union, the newspaper Pravda <http://english.pravda.ru/> is still owned by the Communist Party. The English version covers politics, of course, but also has op-ed and cultural sections. A similar option is Russia Beyond the Headlines <http://rbth.ru/>, the international project of the

official newspaper of the government of the Russian Federation, Rossiyskaya Gazeta. The publication is designed for foreign readers and covers Russian culture, as well as other topics like politics and business.

Meanwhile, Transitions Online <http://www.tol.org/client/> is a journal devoted to the development of independent media and journalism in former Socialist countries, which is connected to the Open Society Institute. While the site's emphasis is on economy and politics, it also has well-developed coverage of cultural issues, presented from a liberal point of view.

Aside from these sponsored publications, there are also several independent resources available that cover Russian cultural issues, either exclusively online, or in tandem with print versions. For example, The Other Russia <http://www.theotherussia.org/>, the website of the "Drugaya Rossiya" coalition, gives the opposition view on current issues (including culture, although this is not their most well-developed section) via articles and op-eds. Russia Info Center <http://www.russia-ic.com/> is another resource not originally intended for cultural research. However, while the site mainly caters to business people, it has expanded to include information on many Russia-related topics. Furthermore, the site Way to Russia <http://blogs.waytorussia.net/> is primarily a travel blog containing some interesting articles regarding politics and culture, which, though geared towards travelers, are potentially useful nonetheless.

There are also several independent cultural resources that are the web-based face of other publications. Russian Life <http://russianlife.com/>, for example, is the Internet version of the magazine of the same name. The site provides articles on Russian culture, society, history, and geography, and also features some thematic blogs and a chronology of Russian historical events. It should be noted, however, that some of the web content is restricted to subscribers only. RIA Novosti <http://en.rian.ru/> is another publication, this one with a more political slant, which still provides a significant amount of cultural news. Articles

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cover events worldwide, but the focus is on Russia and other post-Soviet countries. Russia Profile <http://russiaprofile.org/> is another useful resource, which actually merged with the RIA Novosti English language information service in 2012. It provides analytical insights into the Russian world written by experts in the field on a wide variety of topics from political to cultural. Another option is the Internet version of the print magazine RUSSIA! <http://readrussia.com/>, run and published in the United States and catered towards Russian expats as well as the interested youth audience. The site covers a variety of topics and does not shy away from criticizing the current regime with its oftentimes sarcastic journalistic style. Of course, Russian culture encompasses not only academic and 'high' culture, but unofficial culture as well. English Russia <http://englishrussia.com/>, for example, is dedicated to quirky news stories, which cover topics as diverse as food, music, art, sports, and technology, while Funny Russia <http://funnyrus-sians.com/> covers some of the unofficial, and oftentimes unique and amusing, events in Russia.

Although it is no longer being added to, The Exile http://exile.ru/archive/list.php?IBLOCK_ID=35&PARAMS=ISSUE, the work of American expatriate Mark Ames, is a useful and interesting resource. The site, though shut down in 2008, still exists as a sort of archive of lively journalism covering a wide swathe of Russia related topics. So, while English resources for researching Russia from a contemporary cultural perspective may not immediately present themselves, there are several that do exist and that can be quite useful. By finding and using sources like these, even English speakers have a chance to understand and stay current on Russia's cultural trends.

MARCA Journal Editorial Staff

Ben Roberts

Is a Wisconsin native and a 2010 graduate of the History and Slavic departments at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. After a year abroad in 2008-2009 at Moscow's International University, he became infatuated with Russia's unknowable, indescribable, and utterly fascinating qualities. He entered the MARCA program because he believes that it is only through the study of culture that one will gain a deeper and more rich understanding of Russia and all that enigmatic riddle entails.

Ben Sigelman

Is from New York, NY and majored at Oberlin College in Russian language, literature, and culture and studied at the Bard-Smolny Program in St. Petersburg for a year in 2010-2011. He decided to continue his education in the MARCA program to increase his understand and knowledge of Russian culture by studying it in greater depth, using the opportunities the program has to offer.

Elizabeth Smith

Is an aspiring Slavist with a focus on Russian Imperial History and Balkan Studies. An Orthodox convert with a passion for Glagolitic script and Old Church Slavonic, she has academically studied both Russian and Croatian language, and enjoys nothing better than spending lazy afternoons in Tsarskoe Selo, translating Bulgarian novels as a hobby.

Jenni Kornfeld

Was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. Jenni studied Slavic Language and Literature at the University of Kansas. After receiving her B.A in 2012 she knew she wanted to continue studying Russian culture and improve her language skills. During her junior year, she spent a semester studying at Smolny in St. Petersburg and fell in love with the city. She chose MARCA because there is no better way to study the unique history and language of this country than in its cultural capital. She says she was also very drawn to the idea of receiving her M.A in just one year. It was a win-win situation.

Lara Nichols

Graduated in 2012 from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles with a degree in International Relations and minors in French Language, Russian Language, and Painting. She is currently a student of the IMARES program at the European University.



Visit the MARCA website at:
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